

## **Domestic Homicide Review- Learning briefing**

DHRs are a way to improve our local coordinated community response. Looking at the death of a person aged 16+ as a result of DVA, they aim to: understand what happened; identify where agency responses could be improved; learn lessons including how agencies work together; identify how to improve responses; and to prevent something similar happening to others in the future.

**Introduction:** The East Sussex Safer Communities Partnership undertook a Domestic Homicide Review (DHR) to evaluate multi-agency responses to the murder of a 32-year-old woman and her mother in March 2018. For the purposes of the Review and this Briefing, the pseudonym for the 32-year-old woman is Nicola and Davina, for her mother. The murder was committed by Nicola's ex-partner.

If you work with adults or children affected by domestic violence and abuse (DVA) in East Sussex, there may also be additional specific actions and recommendations for your agency and your role. Please ask your manager, or contact your representative on the Safer Communities Board.

### **Key learning points**

This DHR identified a number of recommendations.

These can be grouped into three priority areas and include:

**Indicators of domestic abuse** – the Review highlighted the use of coercive control, image-based sexual abuse, stalking and harassment, animal abuse, emotional and verbal abuse. It also highlighted a lack of awareness by agencies of the possible presentations of those experiencing domestic abuse, including the impact on physical and mental health.

**Managing Risks** – the Review found that the real risk posed by this perpetrator was not recognised by anyone other than Nicola. Opportunities for routine enquiry about domestic abuse/ feeling safe were missed by agencies and DASH (Domestic Abuse, Stalking and Harassment) Checklists were not completed by professionals.

**Stalking and Harassment** – this was a feature of the domestic abuse perpetrated towards the victim both during the relationship and escalation following the victim ending the relationship. Incidents were not recognised by agencies as stalking and harassment as a feature of domestic abuse, for example, on one occasion logged as criminal damage, and a holistic view of the incidents was not taken.

Stalking and physical assault are significantly associated with murder and attempted murder. This is not just about physical violence but also coercive control and jealous surveillance, which were present in this case.

**The Homicide Timeline** – this Homicide timeline is based on Dr Monckton Smith's research, which reviewed 372 domestic violence killings in the UK and showed an 8-stage timeline of events before a homicide takes place. This case clearly takes us through the 8 stages of the homicide timeline, with an escalation from Nicola ending the relationship to the homicide over a few weeks.

**History:** Nicola was 32 years old at the time of her death. She had known the perpetrator for nine years and had they had been married for five years. He was 35 years old at the time of the incident. Nicola and the perpetrator had lived with her mother, Davina, at Davina's home for the last 5-6 years. Davina was 54 years old at the time of her death. Nicola separated from the perpetrator a month prior to the homicide. The perpetrator shot and killed Nicola and Davina, at Davina's address.

**Victim's perspective:** Nicola stated following the separation from the perpetrator in February 2018, that she was concerned for the safety of herself and her family.

The review sought to get a more complete view of the lives of the victims and the perpetrator in order to see the homicide through the eyes of the victim and perpetrator.

The review is very grateful to a previous partner of the perpetrator who has shared with us her experiences as part of the Review.

**Domestic Violence and Abuse:** The [statutory definition of domestic abuse](#) of DVA is:

- Any incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive or threatening behaviour, violence or abuse between those aged 16 or over who are or have been intimate partners or family members regardless of gender or sexuality. This can encompass, but is not limited to, the following types of abuse: psychological; physical; sexual; financial; and emotional
- Controlling behaviour is: a range of acts designed to make a person subordinate and/or dependent by isolating them from sources of support, exploiting their resources and capacities for personal gain, depriving them of the means needed for independence, resistance and escape and regulating their everyday behaviour

- Coercive behaviour is: an act or a pattern of acts of assault, threats, humiliation and intimidation or other abuse that is used to harm, punish, or frighten their victim.
- The Domestic Abuse Act includes a statutory definition of domestic abuse which includes economic abuse. Economic abuse as defined in the Act means “any behaviour that has a substantial adverse effect on B’s ability to;
  - (a) acquire, use or maintain money or other property, or
  - (b) obtain goods or services.

### **Recognising domestic abuse:**

Coercive control was evident in the relationship between Nicola and the perpetrator including attempts to isolate Nicola from her family, emotionally controlling with ‘vile’ emails which contained private photos stating to Nicola that he had posted these on internet sites, attempts to coerce Nicola into sex, verbal abuse, animal abuse and stalking and harassing behaviour.

In addition, Nicola stated to an agency that she believed the perpetrator had Asperger’s. There is nothing in his medical history to suggest that this is the case. It is possible that the perpetrator used this as a means of ‘excusing or explaining’ his behaviour. Nicola also shared that the perpetrator had in the past, attempted suicide as a means of gaining a reaction. We know that perpetrators of domestic abuse will use threat to end their life as a means of controlling their victim and preventing them from leaving. Furthermore, the perpetrator had told Nicola that he had historic convictions for GBH and ABH, which was not substantiated by Police records and was fabricated. It is possible that he told of convictions that do not exist as a means of frightening Nicola and reminding her exactly what he was capable of.

The Review highlighted a need for a better understanding among clinicians and practitioners of the correlation between patterns of minor illnesses, chronic illness and pain and domestic abuse.

Nicola attended various healthcare settings with complaints of back pain and musculoskeletal symptoms. Nicola also disclosed feeling stressed and presented as both tearful and depressed and had been prescribed with anti-depressants by the GP during her relationship with the perpetrator. However, the potential of these being physical and emotional indicators of domestic abuse don’t appear to have been considered by health agencies and professionals at the time they were disclosed, or followed up on at subsequent appointment.

### **Learning Points**

- Practitioners need to develop a better understanding among clinicians and practitioners of the correlation between patterns of minor illnesses, chronic illness and pain and domestic abuse.

- Practitioners are encouraged to be more professionally curious and create opportunities for people to disclose at an early stage.

### **Stalking and Harassment:**

Stalking and harassment was a feature of the abusive behaviour perpetrated towards Nicola and this escalated significantly following their separation, the month before the homicide. During their relationship, the perpetrator would telephone Nicola during the day whilst she was at work, sometimes up to 20-30 times a day, which interfered with her work.

Following their separation in February 2018, the perpetrator continually emailed and texted Nicola. He would also phone from private numbers or friends' phones to the extent that she changed her phone number. The perpetrator also vandalised her car and threatened to upload sexual images of her on the Internet. These incidents were reported by Nicola but unfortunately, the incidents were considered on an individual basis rather than seeing them as an escalating course of conduct by the perpetrator towards Nicola.

### **Learning points**

- Incidents should not be considered on an individual basis but should be considered as patterns of behaviour and should be escalated and risk assessed on this basis.
- For practitioners to be able to identify stalking and harassment as risk factors for murder in domestic abuse situations.

### **Managing Risk:**

The Review highlighted a lack of identification and action regarding domestic abuse by the clinicians that saw Nicola and this suggests a lack of awareness of the possible presentations of those experiencing domestic abuse.

Opportunities for routine enquiry about domestic abuse in various healthcare settings were also missed. Additionally, opportunities were missed for DASH checklists to be completed and referrals made to specialist service for support.

Assumptions were made in relation to Nicola's safety and other agencies' actions e.g. when Nicola disclosed in a health clinic that the perpetrator was blackmailing her about health-related issues, the nurse who had seen Nicola did explore with her in detail what action had occurred, and the nurse was reassured that the police were involved, she therefore did not complete a DASH form as per the process.

## **Learning Points**

- Clinicians and practitioners to routinely ask patients questions such as if they feel safe at home.
- Practitioners are encouraged to be more professionally curious and create opportunities for people to disclose domestic abuse at an early stage.
- For practitioners to be aware of the DASH checklists, [DASH RIC](#) and are trained in how to complete these: <https://safelives.org.uk/practice-support/resources-identifying-risk-victims-face>.

## **The Homicide Timeline**

Dr Jane Monckton-Smiths' research has identified eight stages through which a relationship that ends in homicide is likely to go through. By considering this timeline we can see that the relationship clearly follows this timeline and the different stages can be seen. The escalation of the abuse and perpetrators' behaviours through the timeline were missed, in:

### **Stage One – Pre-relationship history**

Previous history of abuse is acknowledged in research to predict future abuse (Websdale, 1999) and we know that the perpetrator had been abusive in at least one of his previous relationships.

### **Stage Two – Early relationship behaviours**

We have limited information in this case but are aware that the perpetrator attempted to isolate Nicola from her mother and that they married quickly, at the time the perpetrator wanted to move with Nicola to New Zealand.

### **Stage Three - Relationship warning signs**

There were warning signs in the relationship of the perpetrator controlling Nicola. This included monitoring patterns, such as checking up on her at work.

#### **Stage Four – Trigger warning signs**

Research shows that the biggest trigger for domestic homicide is separation or the threat of separation.

From the chronology of events, we can see very clearly that the separation and decision by Nicola to end the relationship was the trigger for the perpetrator. It was also seen that his previous partner had to have a 'reason' to end the relationship as he would not accept this easily.

#### **Stage Five – Escalation warning signs**

At this point, research says, there will be evidence of an escalation in the warning signs such as the concerning behaviours becoming more frequent or more serious. This escalation appeared, in the research, to be an attempt to re-establish control or status.

This can clearly be seen in the way that the perpetrator behaved in the month leading up to the incident. He made false allegations to the police about her family, he said she had a health infection and was passing it to other partners and was threatening her with publishing photos of her. He then damaged her and her family's property and he tried to force her to have sex with him 'one last time'.

#### **Stage Six – Change of thinking/decision**

This stage appears to occur in or at the end of a period of escalation and may be a response to perceived irretrievable loss of control and/or status.

It might be that the change of thinking occurred in this case when the perpetrator had carried out criminal damage to Nicola and her family's cars because Nicola, for the first time, went to the police and stated that she will support action against him. Although we cannot know for certain when this change in thinking happened, we can be sure that, at some point, he made a considered decision to end her life.

#### **Stage Seven – Planning warning signs**

The detailed level of planning that the perpetrator undertook is only seen after the deaths but we see that he contacted the gun club two days previously to enquire if the 'live range' was available two days later. He enquired when the quietest time would be and if he could have the range to himself. He then drove a good distance from where he was staying, went to the gun club (that he had used previously so he knew how it worked), returned a couple of hours later when a slot for single shooting became available, carried out his plan to obtain the gun and ammunition by threatening the employee and then went straight to Nicola's home. When he was arrested, items were found in his rucksack including a head torch, a roll of duct tape, a packet of plastic cable ties and two bottles of natural intimate lubricant. These items demonstrate his plans to restrain and/or kidnap Nicola and sexually rape her, prior to her execution.

### **Stage Eight – Homicide characteristics**

The homicide timeline identifies the most common characteristics of the intimate partner femicide timeline as a clear homicide with confession, which features in this case. Research identifies that the homicide more usually occurs in the home of the victim (Brennan 2016).

### **Learning points**

- For practitioners to be aware of the homicide timeline and escalation points and risks as opportunities to intervention.
- For practitioners to take a holistic view to incidents and involvement with a victim and/or her family members in identifying incidents as stalking and harassment and domestic abuse and risk assessments.